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Fall 12-9-2014

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Recommended Citation

Puncochar, J. (December 9, 2014). Enhancing Indonesian citizenry through the liberal arts in higher education. Invited Address at Universitas Pembangunan Jaya, Tangerang Selatan, Banten, Indonesia.

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Enhancing Indonesian Citizenry through the Liberal Arts in Higher Education

Presentation and Structured Controversy Workshop
Universitas Pembangunan Jaya
December 9, 2014

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Abstract

Indonesian democracy needs an informed, educated citizenry with skills of perspective taking, debate, and evidence-based reasoning. A rigorous study of the Liberal Arts holds promise for honing a strong Indonesian democracy and a well-educated citizenry. Students who study the Liberal Arts are more likely to develop skills of civic engagement, moral and ethical reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, and lifelong learning. Educators who learn how to structure and encourage academic controversy as part of the expected university Liberal Arts classroom experience are more likely to deliver opportunities for students to practice perspective taking, deal with difficult ethical conflicts, and hone skills for working with diverse opinions and people. A rigorous study of the Liberal Arts and student-centered skills-based learning will help Indonesia continue to achieve a highly educated, peaceful, cooperative, respectful, diverse democratic society.

Presentation and Structured Controversy Workshop at
Universitas Pembangunan Jaya

1. Thank you for inviting me to speak. I am grateful to Prof. Mayling Oey-Gardiner, Ph.D., and Rector Prof. Gunawan Tjahjono, M.Arch., Ph.D., for their invitation to share some ideas about my work on the Liberal Arts with Prof. Chaedar Alwasilah, Ph.D. of the Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). I thank UPI for allowing me to teach 60 S2 and S3 students this semester, and I thank my university (Northern Michigan University) for my sabbatical leave to work in Indonesian higher education. I am happy to be with you today. Terima Kasih!
2. Two weeks ago on November 22, 2014, Prof. Alwasilah and members of seven universities launched a society to enhance Indonesian higher education through rigorous study and innovative teaching with the Liberal Arts. Historically, a Liberal Arts education has prepared citizens for active participation in a democracy. Today, Universitas Pembangunan Jaya (UPJ) plays a leading role in the Liberal Arts in Indonesian higher education.
3. Let us think briefly about the history of Indonesian education starting with colonial education of Europeans and local privileged children and moving to where Indonesian education is now, with free public education for all Indonesian children through 12th grade starting in fall 2015.
4. Let us think, too, about the MKDU, which began as Liberal Arts classes, only to be whittled down to a mind-numbing series of unsatisfactory courses and boring lectures with a potential threat of passive indoctrination (Setiadi, Hakam, & Effendi, 2006, p. 3). UPI recently eliminated art from the MKDU because of difficulty assessing an inconsistent curriculum of various art and music experiences. The current Indonesian MKDU lacks its original clarity of focus on the Liberal Arts *and* needs a much stronger focus on student-centered instruction and assessment of learning outcomes.
5. Prof. Alwasilah and I conducted research at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) and Universitas Pasundan

(UNPAS). We found that students generally are dissatisfied with the MKDU and are dissatisfied with the narrowness of coursework sharply focused on technical, business, and professional programs. Such narrowness in specialization appears *not* to align with the Indonesian national goal of *Unity in Diversity*. In our research, we found that 95.7% of S1 students and 86.4% of S2 students were interested in diversifying their studies with Liberal Arts coursework.

6. Currently, politicization of the term “Liberal Arts” attracts unjustifiable criticism, diverts attention away *from* a serious study of broad knowledge of literature, science, mathematics, history, and art, and severely limits the skills necessary of citizens in a participatory democracy. Instead, Indonesia has an encroaching immersion in technical or professional knowledge and skills, which threatens Indonesian unity and citizens’ skills of communication, ethical reasoning, problem solving, and critical thinking. The expanding number of issues in Indonesia – overcrowding, corruption, rampant cigarette smoking, poverty, rising obesity, lack of knowledge about nutrition and basic health (e.g., sneezing in one’s hands instead of sneezing in the elbow), burning plastics and rubbish within city limits, undrinkable tap water, traffic congestion, air and noise pollution – requires Citizenship Education aka the Liberal Arts.

7. In the USA, most universities and colleges have Liberal Arts programs and students take about 1/4 of their coursework in the Liberal Arts. Students have the opportunity to choose Liberal Arts courses of high interest to them within Liberal Arts categories.

8. Whereas in Indonesia, less than 10% of students’ coursework is the MKDU. The remaining coursework is in students’ degree programs. The result is a narrowness of students’ educational exposure to Liberal Arts knowledge and skills.

9. Indonesian higher education is poised for change. UPJ could be at the heart of this change with its focus on learning outcomes and the Liberal Arts. Indonesia is ready to move toward international recognition of educational excellence under Anis Baswedan’s leadership as Minister of Education and Culture. Minister Baswedan (President of Paramadina University in Jakarta) is a Fulbright Scholar, as is Prof. Chaedar Alwasilah, and Prof. Mayling Oey-Gardiner, and all three are advocates of the Liberal Arts.

10. You are lucky to study at a Liberal Arts University! The Liberal Arts experience produces graduates who can think well. Liberal Arts students tend to be genuinely excited to hone skills of critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and speaking. Liberal Arts lecturers tend to be genuinely excited to teach with a student-centered focus. I have numerous emails from S3 lecturers at UPI who are eager to learn more about “teaching for learning” and engaging students in honing skills for civic engagement and a rigorous study of the Liberal Arts.

11. Students who study the Liberal Arts and lecturers who teach with student-centered learning of the Liberal Arts are able to achieve the former Ministry of Education and Culture’s Curriculum 2013 learning goals (#67 and #70). Curriculum 2013 goals required the use of student-centered teaching strategies, creative innovation, interactive learning, group and community collaboration, and honing interpersonal and leadership skills. Curriculum 2015 will provide even better preparation for Indonesian Citizenship Education, which is exactly what a rigorous study of the Liberal Arts promises to offer!

12. In today’s highly weaponized world, Indonesia’s greatest threat is to educate citizens narrowly without knowledge of the Liberal Arts focus on literature, history, ecology, culture, the arts, and science and mathematics, and without skills of debate, logic, and evidence-based reasoning. Indonesians should understand the power of music, rhetoric, and social influence to affect human emotion *and* the power of social criticism offered by the arts.

13. Indonesians should be able to apply mathematics and evidence-based scientific inquiry to all aspects of life, and Indonesians should read the Great Books of Indonesia.

14. Current Indonesian students in higher education are narrowly educated. My S2 and S3 students arrived in my UPI classroom without honed skills of debate, conflict resolution, or constructive controversy. They lacked confidence in their opinions and knowledge of art, literature, mathematics, and science. I assigned my S2 and S3 students a homework assignment to write letters to the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture on an educational issue of their choice. My students shared how they grappled with fear that initially paralyzed them from voicing their opinions. In an Indonesian democracy, citizens have the right to ask for what they want. Knowledge of your rights is power. Indonesians must practice speaking up and participating in their democracy (Standar Nasional Pendidikan Tinggi, 2013).

15. The hope of Indonesia is a highly educated Indonesian citizenry with skills to build a peaceful, environmentally healthy, cooperative, respectful, safe, and economically fair and transparent society. You, as Indonesian students of higher education, are Indonesia's treasure! You must hone skills of perspective taking, moral and ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and creativity through active learning and a rigorous study of the Liberal Arts. Skills and knowledge of the Liberal Arts provide a foundation for Indonesian Citizenship Education and the democratic skills of constructive controversy, debate, logic, and problem solving.

16. In conclusion, we must thank the entire academic community for seeking to unlock the potential of active learning with Citizenship Education, critical thinking, and the Liberal Arts. We must thank everyone in the audience for taking time from busy schedules to be here to experience a structured controversy, so let us start! Thank you!

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